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ABSTRACT

An urban school reform strategy which stresses the development of local capacities for problem solving is described in this paper. The context which gave rise to this conceptualization of reform is analyzed and some difficulties with the conceptualization are discussed. Difficulties include ambiguities about the boundaries of "local," unclear definitions of what would constitute the "capacity" of schools and communities, and the dangers of theoretical concentration only on organizational psychology's approach to problem solving. The analysis is based on the study of nine locally initiated projects which were selected by the National Institute of Education as examples of this approach to reform. Aspects of school settings found to be relevant to educational improvement are discussed. These aspects include features of the school's connection to its political and cultural environment; teaching as a craft/occupation; and the school as an organization. (Author/GC)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REFORM STRATEGY WHICH STRESSES THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN SCHOOL CAPACITIES FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

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ABSTRACT

The paper briefly describes an urban school reform strategy which stresses the development of local capacities for problem solving rather than the imposition of some specific innovation. The paper analyzes the context which gave rise to this conceptualization of reform and discusses some difficulties with this conceptualization. The analysis is based on the study of nine locally initiated projects, which were selected by NIE as exemplary of this approach to reform. Difficulties with this conceptualization include ambiguity about what are the boundaries of local, unclarities about what would consititute the "capacity" of school/communities and dangers of the theoretical myopia of concentration only on organizational psychology's approaches to problem solving.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Documentation and Technical Assistance in Urban Schools Project (DTA) is an effort to learn more about how to make urban public schools work better for urban students. Toward this end, DTA combines educational research and practice within one project. DTA's mandate has three interrelated parts:

> DOCUMENTATION - to study, using primarily ethnographic techniques, the ways in which selected urban schools organize themselves to solve problems. Documentation focuses upon nine sites throughout the country selected and funded by NIE to continue to engage in locally initiated improvement activities.
>
> TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE - to develop in practice specific strategies which are designed to improve urban public schooling. Technical assistance strategies are based in part upon documentation of useful practices in the nine funded sites.
>
> LINKAGE - to increase understanding, through observation of DTA's attempts to link documentation with technical assistance, of the processes through which research can be useful to practice, and practice can influence research.

Our work is designed to effect school improvement through direct work in urban public schools and through sharing what we learn with the following audiences: parents, teachers, and administrators of urban public schools; the educational research community; groups or agencies working to assist urban schools; policy makers.

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Introduction

Urban schools are notorious for not serving their clients well. In the last decades, there have been major efforts to improve these schools. Social scientists and the public have been disillusioned with the results of these efforts. In a report entitled Building Capacity for Renewal and Reform, the National Institute of Education (1973) staff expressed the view of a growing number of those concerned with improving schools. The report suggested that these efforts may not have been successful because they concentrated on introducing particular innovations rather than on restructuring the schools in ways that would enable them to work successfully on their problems on a long term bas's.

This new approach to what is necessary for genuine, enduring improvement of schools is based on the premise that there are local, structural arrangements of some school settings which more than others seem to lead to sustained improvement. Moreover, rather than concentrating just on the adoption of innovations, this approach presumes that wide array of actions might be part of a process of solving problems including such activities as modifying externally introduced innovations, internally modifying the setting, resisting modifications, and so on. This quality of a school setting in which people are able to do whatever has to be done to work on problems has been called a local capacity for problem solving.

The Documentation and Technical Assistance Project (DTA) was awarded a contract by the National Institute of Eduation to explore the usefulness of this paradigm for people concerned with improving urban schools. What specific kinds of actions are necessary for solving problems and what structures seem to promote these actions on a long terms basis are not very

well understood. We were to gain this understanding by studying nine locally initiated projects selected by NIE through a national competition, which they judged to exemplify promising approaches to building local capacities and by trying to use what we learned to help other schools restructure themselves.* The DTA unit with the resonsibility for documenting the experience of the nine sites has now shared the lives of these sites for a period of two and a half years. We have learned much about how school settings might be structured to support ongoing processes of problem solving and about what might be done to help schools restructure themselves in these ways. We have produced a case study for each of the nine sites. Finally, we are writing a series of comparative analyses of what we have observed in the various sites. In this paper we briefly analyze the paradigm of local capacity for problem solving which is at the core of DTA's work. We urge those interested in more detail to consult the papers listed at the end.

First, we discuss the larger social context out of which an interest in local capacities for problem solving arises. We briefly describe the political milieu which emphasizes decentralization, the experience with innovations in the 1960s which shows the importance of local settings in shaping what really happens and a shift in educational research away from the search for universally applicable general principles toward the attempt to understand interactive and situational determinants of behavior. Anyone entertaining the paradigm of local capacities needs to be aware of these

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*For more information on the nine sites and DTA's dual emphasis contract, see the methodological appendix to the paper "Explorations of the Concept of Local Capacities for Problem Solving" (Wilson, 1977)

substrata of assumptions and history so they will not be blinded to other approaches to the improvement of schools.

Second, we present some of the conceptual difficulties of the paradigm which we have identified through the research. We note that one major difficulty is the impossibility of directly observing an organizational capacity and suggest that capacity must be inferred from a pattern of actions over time. We submit that the most beneficial focus for those interested in improving schools is understanding what features of school settings seem to support ongoing processes of improvement. We conclude by discussing three substantive research traditions which the data from the nine sites convince us are relevant to identifying and understanding these features. These three traditions are (1) the school's connection to its political and cultural environment; (2) teaching as a craft/occupation; (3) the school as an organization. These traditions can be somewhat integrated but often are at odds in emphasizing very different features of settings.

Context for Interest in Capacities for Local Problem Solving

An emphasis on local problem solving in eduation can best be understood in the context of more general societal trends. There is disillusionment in the efficacy of the federally initiated programs of the sixties in addressing social problems. Many analysts question the ability of large bureaucracy to accomplish many important tasks in government and other realms such as business and social service. Bureaucracy is seen as ineffective because of the distance between decision makers and the people served and because of the excess energy required to have a bureaucracy

complete tasks that smaller decentralized units could do more easily. Political pressures are being exerted to get resources and the right to define problems and assign priorities back in the control of local governments as illustrated by revenue sharing and the 1976 platforms of both major political parties. Decentralization has been a rallying call.

One reason federal policy makers may find the concept of local problem solving so appealing is that they hope to avoid many of the basic value issues underlying decisions about social action. Helping locally based people sounds like a positive and uncontroversial activity. However, value issues cannot be avoided ultimately and local people must contend with them if the federal policy makers do not.

The emphasis on local problem solving in education grows out of even more than these general trends. Research has accumulated in the last decades to show how important local organizations and political entities are in determining what happens in schools. Furthermore, the studies of implementation of large scale curricular and teaching innovation programs (Ford Foundation, 1972; Berman and McLaughlin, 1975) have shown how powerful the local setting is in modifying even supposedly standardized programs.

In the organization of NIE in 1973 one of the major divisions focused on research to identify how local entities work to solve educational problems. An announcement of the following year contains a statement about the original NIE policy priority:

> The problem solving priority results from a policy study undertaken by NIE staff (Building Capacity for Renewal and Reform, NIE, December 1973). A major part of that study addresses the issue of how to bring about a continuous

> capacity for self-improvement in schools and school districts. The study reviews past federal efforts to stimulate school change, taking note of research findings that point out that while there has been much "innovative" activity in the schools little of it has resulted in sustained change. The study argues that previous reform strategies often failed because insufficient attention was addressed to the development of local organizational capacities to sustain a process of school improvement. (Program Announcement: Grants to Develop Organizational Strategies for Sustained Improvement of Urban Schools, NIE - PA-74-01, 1974).

There are several underlying assumptions implicit in a concern about local problem solving. First, there is the assumption that local people are the best ones to identify and make decisions about their problems and/or that they are the most effective ones to implement actions. There may also be a value position that they are the ones who ought to be involved.

The emphasis on local problem solving has a second important set of assumptions. At one time educators seemed to think that there would eventually be universally applicable psychological or curricular principles that would form the bases of improving the schools. Now there is more skepticism about such principles. Vast programs of research undertaken to identify preferred teaching methods or organizational philosophies for schools have resulted in confusing and contradictory findings. Stephens (1967), for example, writes about the failure to obtain consistent findings about the effectiveness of different styles of teaching.

One conclusion to be drawn from these research results is that the uniqueness of local settings wields such influence on outcomes that general principles and approaches are useful only as guidelines. Each local setting must be considered, and a general approach must match local situations and goals. Thus, an emphasis on local problem solving is justified. Also, research is warranted on what features of local settings facilitate the effectiveness of this modification process.

There is much more analysis that could be conducted about societal and educational research contexts out of which this emphasis on local capacity arises, about the way recent experience with innovations has been interpreted, and about the assumptions and ideology that underlie this emphasis. Such a fundamental examination is beyond the scope of what we take to be our task in this project. For further discussion of the way recent experience with innovations has led to this emphasis we refer the reader to other sources (NIE, 1973, 1975; Havelock, 1969; Fullan, 1972; and Berman & McLaughlin, 1975).

In order to have a foundation on which to work, we researchers within the Documentation unit of the DTA Project have had to accept the possibility of the existence of such things as local capacities for problem solving. At the same time we have taken a consciously critical stance toward these concepts and have tried to conduct our documentation and analysis in a way that would generate information about the viability of the concepts and the fruitfulness of such a view of schools.

Further, we have worked in a project which has by design insisted that we constantly consider how our questions can directly benefit school practitioners. Other staff within the DTA Project have been working directly with local schools to assist with building problem solving capacities. Their involvement in giving assistance works against any profound questioning of underlying assumptions. Part of the work of the documentation unit has been to supply the assistance units with information which will directly support the assistance efforts. We have found ourselves then in the fascinating predicament of being questioning researchers at the same time having to directly consider the more impatient needs of staff working in assistance to schools.

Conceptual Difficulties

We have noted several conceptual difficulties with the paradigm of local capacity for problem solving. The concepts of problem and problem solving can lead to unclarity. For example, in the nine sites we studied, definitions of what situations were a "problem" varied from group to group. Occasionally a problem solution for one group became a new problem for another, for example, establishment of a school community school board. Also we saw that what was included in the category problem could qualitatively vary from minor difficulties such as the coke machine doesn't work to major concerns such as the school was not serving minority youth well. To classify all these within the class "problem" sometimes obscured more than it illuminated. Similarly, the term "problem solving" connotes specific kinds of processes usually focused upon by the working within traditions of organizational and social psychology, and stressing such concerns as systematic planning and group communication. While these processes do constitute forms of problem solving we discovered in the nine sites that people conceptualized a great many other kinds of processes as contributing to ongoing improvement; for example, the institution of alternative educational programs or fighting to resist changes perceived as damaging. There was a danger of being too limited by traditional notions of "problem solving."

We also noted difficulties with the concept of "local." Definitions of what constituted the valid boundaries of local varied from a notion that included the teachers and principal of a particular school to one including the school and its parent clientele to one with the whole city school district. What kinds of actions and structures might support ongoing

improvement varied greatly with what was seen to be local. In addition we observed repeatedly that there were important non-local constraints on what could happen at the local level; for instance, fiscal crises of schools, mandated integration and pervasive society-wide racism. Even though one might focus on local actions and structures, it was important not to be blind to larger issues and to the idea that the local features might be doomed to be relatively weak in comparison to these larger forces.

Finally, we noted that there are a great variety of features of local settings which might support ongoing improvement. Capacity was not as simple a concept as it sounded. The nine sites we studied varied greatly in their strategies of trying to build local capacities and their underlying analysis of what was needed. The strategies of the sites included teacher centers, organizational consultations of various kinds, community-school arrangements, constitutionally established roles for teachers in decision making, and other approaches. Although no site accomplished its goals in total, most were able to establish some new structures, patterns, and attitudes which seemed to promise ongoing support for improvement.

Three Traditions

Different analytical traditions stress different kinds of features as being most important for ongoing improvement of schools. We found it useful to identify three different traditions which encompassed the thrusts at the nine sites. These traditions are (1) the school's connection to its political and cultural environment; (2) teaching as a craft/occupation, and (3) the school as an organization. The sites seemed to be working on features typically stressed by these traditions. Our research suggests,

however, that the strategies usually concentrated on features stressed by one of these traditions and ignored features emphasized by other traditions. For instance, one site concentrated on governance structures to increase parents' regular influence on school policy, but did not pay much attention to supporting teachers in their craft of teaching. We have thought about the feasibility and potential power of a strategy which would build from all of these traditions. While we have not worked that out yet, we did find these three traditions a useful way to organize our observations. We offer a brief sample of some of what we've seen. We are not able to do justice here to the complexities of events at the sites; for those stories the reader should consult the case studies and other analytical papers.

(1) Schools' Connection to their Political and Cultural Environment

In one site the funded strategy tried to shape the cognitive frameworks within which parents and teachers analyzed the processes and problems of the education of Black children and to help the parents organize themselves for effective action. People at the site believed that many typical problem-solving sequences were based on faulty racist analysis and thus tried to answer the wrong questions. While they experienced some success in helping parents become a more viable presence in the school and in providing teachers with a unique informed parental resource, their ability to establish a long-term capacity was thwarted by -- among other things -- city-wide staff integration actions which caused the transfer of teachers they had worked with.

In another site a neighborhood school board, composed of both community members and staff, was carefully developed until it genuinely assumed the responsibility for running the school and other neighborhood social services. The community presence increased the morale of the school and

introduced an enlarged range of concerns into discussions about school policy. The district school board, threatened by this approach or having other notions of how to improve schools, fought to close this school.

(2) Teaching as a Craft

Another site tried to create an environment where teachers could support each other in the day-to-day practice of their craft. The strategy sought to create small mini-communities of teachers where reflection and planning could be intimately tied to life in the classrooms. Advisors worked with these groups to increase their sophistication in being of assistance to each other. Our research suggested that an emphasis on the ongoing shared articulation of a theory of education and child development was a crucial feature in the effectiveness of this approach in stimulating ongoing improvement that reached the child in the classroom.

(3) Schools as Organizations

In another site the emphasis was on teaching school personnel the skills and norms of systematic planning and group processes, and on creating new structures to support these ongoing processes. Committees of the relevant constituencies were organized, to first assess the needs of the schools. Staff were urged to work together in small groups and to submit proposals for programs to address these needs. A committee and a special staff supported the staff on the development of these programs and ultimately decided on the distribution of resources to support programs. The effectiveness of the programs was analyzed and modifications or new programs planned. The research suggested that this strategy indeed stimulated ongoing improvement, but the genuine incorporation of these processes and

structures into the school was in question as was the ultimate effectiveness of these actions for ameliorating the most pressing problems. The research also suggested that the careful political work by the staff of the assistance group with central office personnel was extremely important in the success the strategy did have.

Conclusion

The reform paradigm of stressing the development of local capacities for problem solving has its conceptual difficulties. Nonetheless, we are convinced it is an approach which deserves further investigation by those seeking to understand how urban schools work and by those seeking to improve urban schools in fundamental ways. In the nine sites we have studied we have seen promising starts. The incipient capacities that have been established certainly seem fragile and they may erode quickly in the whirlwind of forces buffeting urban schools.

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